USDA NRCS
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Plant Fact Sheet

REED CANARYGRASS

Phalaris arundinacea L.

Plant Symbol = PHAR3

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program

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Uses

Erosion control: The extensive, rhizomatous root system and dense growth of reed canarygrass provide excellent erosion control, especially along stream banks, shorelines and waterways. Reed canarygrass invades wet areas so its use along ditches, canals and drains can create maintenance problems; it can also be troublesome in wetland habitats.

Filter fields: Reed canarygrass is a heavy user of fertilizer and actively grows throughout a long season. Because of this and its excellent adaptation to wet sites, it is well suited for use in seeding filter fields which collect wastewater from food processing industries, livestock operations, and sewage treatment plants. Cutting and removal of biomass is required for good nutrient uptake performance, but a 6 to 8 inch cut height is recommended for rapid regrowth under these conditions. Any forage produced can be used for livestock feed.

Forage: Reed canarygrass is primarily adapted for permanent hay or pasture on sites too wet for good performance of other forage plants. The forage should be grazed or mowed prior to heading as both quality and palatability decline rapidly after heading. A common mistake is to use reed canarygrass on wet sites where timely harvest is not possible.

Wildlife: This grass provides excellent nesting and escape cover and the shattered seeds are readily eaten by many species of birds.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Weediness

This plant may become weedy or invasive in some regions or habitats and may displace desirable vegetation if not properly managed. Please consult with your local NRCS Field Office, Cooperative Extension Service office, or state natural resource or agriculture department regarding its status and use. Weed information is also available from the PLANTS Web site at plants.usda.gov.

Description

Phalaris arundinacea L., reed canarygrass, is a vigorous, productive, long-lived, perennial, sod-forming grass. It is a widespread species native to North America, Europe, and Asia. The numerous broad, moderately harsh, erect leaves are dominantly basal. The coarse, erect stems may reach a height of 6 to 8 feet. Seed is borne in an open panicle which ripens from the top down and shatters readily as it matures. The seed has a short storage life, up to 5 years, and should be checked for germination within 6 months of its use. Reed canarygrass has excellent frost tolerance and is well suited to wet soils that are poorly drained or subject to flooding. It also has good drought tolerance. Growth begins in early spring and continues through the growing season. Regrowth following mowing or grazing is rapid on fertile sites. Forage quality is good prior to heading but then declines rapidly.

Adaptation and Distribution
Reed canarygrass is adapted to soils too wet for bromegrass, fescue, and orchardgrass. It is very cold tolerant and will withstand temperatures well below -30 °F. It is moderately drought tolerant but requires 18 inches annual precipitation or irrigation for good performance. It is adapted to a wide range of soil conditions but its major use is on poorly drained soils or those subject to inundation. Once established, it will withstand continuous inundation for 60 to 70 days. It does well on soils that range from moderately acidic to weakly saline-alkaline. It will tolerate saltier soils with frequent irrigation or natural flooding.

Reed canarygrass is distributed throughout the west, north, and northeastern United States. For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

Establishment
A firm, moist, clean seedbed is needed for good emergence. Old fields or meadows should be cropped to annual crops for 1 to 2 years to eliminate perennial weeds, grasses and sedges before seeding reed canarygrass. The seed germinates readily but is somewhat slow to establish. Seed in pure stands at a rate of 5 to 7 pounds per acre. Seeding should be done in late fall or early spring. Plant shallow, no deeper than 1/2 inch. If necessary, irrigate to maintain surface moisture until plants are well established.

Management
New seedings should not be grazed until fully established. It is best to harvest for hay one to two times before grazing. To maintain plant vigor and promote rapid regrowth, leave a stubble of 6 inches after mowing or grazing. Start spring grazing after plants reach a height of 10 to 12 inches. Harvest hay when the first seedheads appear. Reed canarygrass will persist under close, frequent use but yield will be greatly reduced. Its persistence under heavy use does make it well suited for calving, lambing, holding areas or other special-use pastures.

To maintain good yields an annual application of nitrogen will be required on most sites.

Pests and Potential Problems
The leaf disease *Helminthosporium giganteum* sometimes attacks reed canarygrass and work in Pennsylvania led to the discovery of the disease tawny blotch (*Stagonospora foliicola*) on this plant.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)
Improved cultivars and places of development are 'Castor', 'Grove', 'Rival' (Canada) and 'Ioreed', 'Palaton', 'R.P. 200', 'Vantage', 'Venture' (Iowa). 'Palaton', 'Rival', and 'Venture' are low alkaloid-containing cultivars and are greatly preferred for all uses in the Northeast. Common types of reed canarygrass are available from most commercial sources.

Control
Please contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county weed specialist to learn what works best in your area and how to use it safely. Always read label and safety instructions for each control method. Trade names and control measures appear in this document only to provide specific information. USDA, NRCS does not guarantee or warranty the products and control methods named, and other products may be equally effective.

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site<http://plants.usda.gov> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>